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THE MOTIVATION OF DEBATE IN OUR SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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While debating is not one of the subjects of the curriculum of many of our secondary schools, few of these schools are without one or more debating societies. Those who have come in contact with this phase of secondary-school work appreciate the value of the training gained through debate, but they also recognize some of the harmful tendencies in our present-day practice. It is the purpose of this paper to indicate a few of these evils and to suggest some changes in our procedure which will counteract these harmful tendencies.

The tendencies just suggested may be traced to a mistaken idea of the function or aim of debate. In life the aim of debate is to lead others to act or think as we feel they ought to act or think. In our school debates the aim most frequently is to gain the decision of the judges. In life we have little respect for the person who is not sincere in his efforts to convince us, who really does not believe in the course of action which he would have us take. In our school debates it is not uncommon for debaters to argue against their convictions. In life, logic, voice, gesture, and personality are important means which we use in our endeavors to accomplish the aim of debate. In our school debates these means become ends in themselves, points to be noted and scored by judges to be used in determining their artificial decision. In life we may see the light during debate and capitulate. In school debating the student who becomes convinced that he does not believe in his side is urged to continue in his preparation for what may justly be called an intellectual prize-fight.

Such are some of the harmful tendencies which have resulted from mistaken ideas of the nature of debate. In order to counteract these tendencies it will be necessary to arrange

situations which will closely resemble the life-situations which call forth debate. Instead of spinning fine theories of what ought to be done in this line, the writer will sketch an outline of the plan being followed successfully by one of the debating societies of the Kansas State Normal College. As the society contains not a few secondary-school students in its membership there is reason to believe that the plan could be put into successful operation in our secondary schools.

A brief introductory account of how the plan came to be adopted will be of interest to the reader. The young men of the club were fast becoming very much dissatisfied with what they felt to be a high-school method of procedure. A committee on debate assigned both questions and sides. Seldom were the men vitally interested in the question to be debated. Frequently they were called upon to advocate the side opposed to their convictions. Little interest was taken in the debates. Judges often confessed that they cast their vote for a side not because that side had convinced them but because it had presented the greater number of "points." The debaters often admitted in the discussions which followed the formal debate that they had not expressed their convictions but had really argued against them. Indeed, the men came to feel that the only real and natural part of the procedure came after the debate, when the question was thrown open for discussion. In short, they came to feel that their artificial form of procedure must either be reformed or revolutionized if their debates were to be worth while. Several of the members appealed to the writer, who was at that time the club's critic. As a result of the co-operation of club and critic the following plans were formulated and put into successful operation.

The aim of the club was broadened to include investigation and discussion as well as debate. The motto was changed to, "Make good!" The constitution was amended so that only questions of vital interest to Kansas and Kansans could be investigated, discussed, and debated. Such were the preliminary changes. The new procedure of the club may be sketched as follows:

At the beginning of each term each member presents a question which he believes is or ought to be of vital interest to the inhabitants of his state. He is prepared to give what he considers adequate reasons for his belief that the question he proposes is or ought to be of vital interest to Kansas. From the questions proposed the club selects a number for investigation. Of these one is chosen for discussion at the next meeting, before which each member is supposed to gather as much data as he can. It will be noted that the question has not yet been formulated as a resolution but is still regarded as a problem to be solved: for instance, "How ought our county superintendents to be chosen?" In preparation for this second meeting each member studies the problem. The meeting is devoted to the discussion of the various solutions proposed, together with the data supporting those solutions. If the discussion does not result in an agreement as to the best solution of the problem, there results the clash that calls for debate. When this is the case one of the solutions proposed is incorporated in a resolution, as for example: "Resolved, That it is the sense of this club that our county superintendents ought to be appointed by an elected county board of education."

From among those eager to have the resolution adopted are selected the two affirmative debaters and two alternates, while from among those opposed to the adoption of the resolution are chosen the two negatives and two alternates. As a result of this method of selecting debaters, all the men selected are vitally interested, and each man is an ardent advocate of the side he is taking, not because it strikes his fancy, but because it is an expression of his solution of a problem to which he has already given an impartial study.

After the debaters have been selected a date for the formal debate is fixed. At this meeting the resolution is formally presented by the first speaker on the affirmative side and is seconded by the second speaker on that side. The debate then proceeds according to any rules which may be agreed upon with respect to length of speeches and number of rebuttals, but without any reference to the "honorable judges"; for there are none, since

at the close of the last rebuttal speech the previous question is moved and a written ballot is taken. In order to pass such resolutions it is necessary to secure a two-thirds majority vote. If the negative side receives a two-thirds majority vote the resolution is "killed," while if neither side receives such a vote the resolution is placed on the list of possible questions for debate. In voting, each member expresses his conviction as it stands after he has listened to both sides.

The debater in preparing his debate knows that the debate will not be merely a marshaling of logical arguments. Arguments must not only be logical, but they must be arranged and presented psychologically in such a way as to carry conviction. It is not a hypothetically impartial trio of judges, a logical machine capable of turning out an artificial decision, which the debater must face. He must carry conviction in the minds of a group of live men, each of whom is by his previous study of the question more or less prejudiced. In order to carry such conviction to the minds of others the debater must himself be convinced. If during his preparation any one of the debaters discovers evidence which destroys his conviction it is proper for him to withdraw and to allow his place to be taken by one of the alternates working on his side.

It will readily be seen that this method of procedure introduces life-situations which naturally evoke debate and which permit the aims of debate to be realized. All members have training in investigating and solving problems. These problems are proposed by the members themselves. Only questions upon which there is a genuine disagreement are debated. The integrity of each debater is preserved, since all taking an active part in the debate on the resolution have arrived at their convictions through an independent study of the problems involved. The real motive for debate is preserved, since all the efforts of the debaters are concentrated upon convincing their fellow-members. It is a motive which inspires the men to put their very best efforts into their work, and their work is the kind which develops character as well as knowledge.